

EDWARD SCHILLEBEECKX AND
CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

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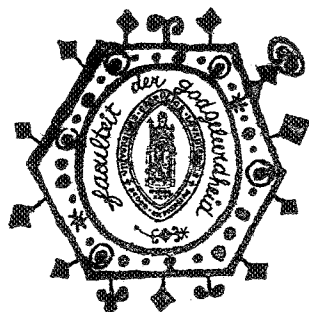
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Dedicated to the memory of Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914–2009)



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In Memoriam Edward Schillebeeckx, OP (1914–2009)

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The Dominican theologian Edward Schillebeeckx died on 23 December 2009 in Nijmegen, the Netherlands. Schillebeeckx has played a major role in twentieth century and contemporary theology and worked on the fracture separating a bygone era from a new one. He is recognized by many people as a pioneer in theology who connected faith, Church and theology with modern humanity in a secular society. Schillebeeckx was open to other religions because, as he put it so strikingly, 'God has such an abundance of truth that he cannot be fully interpreted by just one religion'. 'On the other hand, our knowledge of God cannot be grasped in the best of all religions combined. God is forever new and larger than all religions put together.'

Edward Schillebeeckx was born in Antwerp, on 12 November 1914. He received his secondary education at the Jesuit College of Turnhout in Belgium. In 1934, he entered into the order of the Dominicans and he was ordained as a priest in 1941. After his graduation in Theology, in 1943, he was appointed as a lecturer of Dogmatic Theology at the Dominican Studium of Leuven and at the Higher Institute for Religious Studies in Leuven. The central idea of his lectures was that God is not an abstraction but a living God who engages with humanity and the world. This implies that theologians will have to constantly re-evaluate God's presence in the here and now. Tradition is not unchanging; it constantly relates to the spirit of the times.

From 1945 onwards, Schillebeeckx pursued his academic career in Paris. He attended lectures given by the Dominican theologians Yves Congar and Marie-Dominique Chenu, and he was introduced to the works of writer and philosopher Albert Camus. Around the same time, a clerical labour movement arose in France. Its aim was to reduce the distance between the Church and daily life by having priests work and live alongside labourers. Although this movement was eventually banned by the leaders of the Church, its influence was clearly tangible in the later council documents that sought to reformulate the relation between Church and world.

Late in 1957, Schillebeeckx was appointed Professor of Dogmatics and History of Theology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the current Radboud University. He lectured at this university until his retirement in 1983. Shortly after his appointment, Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). The Dutch bishops asked Schillebeeckx to accompany them as their advisor during the Council. In 1960 he wrote a pastoral letter on the bishops behalf to the faithful informing them about

the Council. This letter gained international fame because of the way in which Schillebeeckx described the relationship between the faithful and the Church hierarchy: he believed that the bishops' and the pope's task is to express the life of the faithful, rather than the other way around.

At the time of the Council, Schillebeeckx delivered various lectures in Rome which established his international reputation. Thanks to his close cooperation with the Dutch episcopate and his appearances on television, he became the foremost theological spokesperson on Dutch Roman-Catholicism. His name and fame also reflected favourably upon the theological faculty at Nijmegen, which gained a reputation for innovative, open and high-standard theological pursuits.

Schillebeeckx aimed to promote theology among a wider audience. In 1961 he took the initiative to found the *Tijdschrift voor theologie* which exists to this day and which aims to connect current affairs with theological reflection. In 1965, Schillebeeckx and a number of other theologians, including Yves Congar, Hans Küng, Johann Baptist Metz and Karl Rahner, started the international journal *Concilium*. The purpose of this journal was to continue the debate on the central issues of the Second Vatican Council.

In 1974, he published the first volume of his renowned trilogy on Christology, *Jezus, het verhaal van een levende* (translated in English in 1979 as *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*), and in 1977 *Gerechtigheid en liefde, genade en bevrijding* (translated in English in 1980 as *Christ: The Christian Experience in the Modern World* [in the UK] and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* [in the US]). In these books, Schillebeeckx clearly shows that a scholarly examination of the texts of the New Testament of the Bible, in particular of those concerning the life of Jesus of Nazareth, is not at odds with the tradition of the Church, but rather brings it up to date. Moreover, Schillebeeckx presented Christian faith as a source of inspiration for people who want to stand up for the poor and the oppressed and who want to change the world for the good. These books broke new ground for twentieth-century theology and are still widely read and studied.

Schillebeeckx continued to be involved in the internal affairs of the Church after the Second Vatican Council. In addition to his earlier works on the sacraments of the Church (*De sacramentele heilseconomie*, 1953), his later publications deal with the priesthood and the role of the faithful in the Church (*Kerkelijk ambt*, 1980 and *Pleidooi voor mensen in de kerk*, 1985, translated as *Ministry and The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry*). Due to the innovative character of his work, Church authorities asked Schillebeeckx to justify himself on three separate occasions. However, he was not condemned. During this same time, Schillebeeckx received many honorary doctorates, including an honorary doctorate from the Catholic University of Leuven in 1974. Shortly before his retirement in 1983, he received the prestigious European Erasmus prize.

Schillebeeckx remained active after his retirement. In 1989, he published the final part of his Christological trilogy, *Mensen als verhaal van God* (translated as *Church: The Human Story of God*). His proposition that no salvation can be found outside this world (*extra mundum nulla salus*) conflicted at that time with the official Church point of view, which stated that there is no salvation outside the Church. As late as 2000, Schillebeeckx surprised many people with an article in the *Tijdschrift voor theologie* in which he discussed recent developments in anthropology and ritual studies.

Schillebeeckx's approach is largely responsible for completing the turn towards hermeneutics in Catholic theology. Indeed, it is almost impossible now to conceptualize the experience of faith without taking into account the interaction of experience and interpretation in which tradition and the faith community are continuously involved. Being Christian has to do with the specific ways of experiencing and interpreting concrete reality. God reveals Godself as justice and love in the concrete history of human beings, in the everyday activities of living and loving together. While this was the case in the past, it also is true for Christians today and will continue to be true for Christians in the future. Theology, therefore, can only be credible and relevant when it engages itself with the present-day (faith) experience of ordinary men and women and when it brings this experience into relationship with the experience of divine salvation with which Jesus' first disciples were familiar.

Two crucial experiences are of vital importance for Schillebeeckx: first, the 'Abba' experience of Jesus himself, which expresses the extraordinarily intimate bond between Jesus and the Father, and secondly, the resurrection experience of the first disciples after the Crucifixion: 'He is alive, and He will return.' The disciples' Easter experience is one of conversion, an experience of salvation that restores their relationship with Jesus and brings them together once again to form the kernel of the Christian faith community. It is this experience of divine salvation in Jesus Christ which is expressed in multiple ways throughout the New Testament. This same foundational experience serves as the driving force behind the Christian experiential tradition: taking a different form each time language, history and context changes.

For Schillebeeckx, believers are once again faced with the task of reflecting on God as salvation for the world today by the emergence of modernity and secularization. To this end, men and women must explore human experience in an effort to determine where the basic Christian experience is to be found and unlocked. According to Schillebeeckx, the 'contrast experience' grants modern Christians, living in a secularized culture, access to this basic Christian experience. At the same time, this secular (pre-religious) experience of being taken aback by suffering and

injustice unlocks the desire for a better future. A 'hope-filled Yes', a belief in the humanness of humanity, is revealed in our 'unconditional No' to suffering and oppression. For Schillebeeckx, today's Christian identity is granted significance when the contrasting secular experience is brought into relationship with the basic Christian experience of salvation. In our human struggle for justice and liberation, the God of love and grace is articulated and expressed. Our concrete engagement on behalf of those who are suffering, our struggle in support of the 'humanum', is the privileged location in which God's engagement with humanity can be experienced.

Grounded in his conviction that faith involves contextual interpretations of fundamental experiences of salvation, Schillebeeckx was particularly concerned about the obstinate maintenance of traditional formulations, practices and structures. In his opinion, they impede the unlocking of the basic Christian experience. This position frequently led him to be sharply critical both of the Church and of the tradition. For example, he accused the Church and its hierarchical procedures of alienating the faithful and threatening the very existence of the Eucharist and of the faith community itself by clinging to an obsolete understanding of ministry that restricted priesthood to celibate men.

The influence which Schillebeeckx exercised over two generations of believers and theologians is almost beyond comprehension. He taught theologians to enter into dialogue with new philosophical movements and with the human sciences, with the surrounding culture and society. He demonstrated the impossibility of a theological perspective on Jesus Christ without the input of historical-critical research into the Jesus of history. He insisted that salvation should not be understood as exclusively individual and spiritual, but that it also has practical, political and ecological dimensions. Perhaps the most important lesson we learned, however, from Schillebeeckx is the fact that being Christian has to do with concrete human existence – that 'dogma' is nothing without life itself. Only when faith, Church, tradition and world are able to mediate divine salvation in an ongoing and tangible way will they ultimately find grace in the eyes of God. God, after all, is always 'new'.